DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 388 968 CS 215 080

AUTHOR Allington, Richard
TITLE Who Controls the Literature Curriculum?
INSTITUTION National Research Center on Literature Teaching and Learning, Albany, NY.
SPONS AGENCY Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
PUB DATE 95
NOTE 3p.
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Journal Articles (080)
JOURNAL CIT Literature Update; p1-2 Fall 1995

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Administrative Policy; Administrators; Childrens Literature; *Curriculum Problems; Elementary Education; *Elementary School Curriculum; Language Arts; Power Structure; Quality Control; *Reading Instruction; *State Standards; *Textbook Selection
IDENTIFIERS *Standardized Curriculum

ABSTRACT

Within the literacy education community, the focus on decentralizing curriculum decisions, i.e., returning to teachers the authority to make many decisions, including those about which texts to use, has garnered much attention. But the issue is not quite so straightforward, given the power structure currently found in most K-12 educational settings and the general consensus that curriculum standardization is important. However, the power to regulate curriculum is typically assigned to those who work outside the classroom and often outside the schools. For instance, the authority of state legislatures to establish curriculum standards has been upheld by the federal courts. The press for standardization, however, is also present among teachers themselves. It has been common in schools studied to find teachers working to define a curriculum around a set of core books to be read in a particular course. During one focus-group, a new fourth-grade teacher told of how another teacher removed books from a display she had set up, because fourth-graders were not allowed to read those books as they were part of the fifth-grade curriculum. Also, without a common curriculum, some administrators fear variation in the instruction offered across classrooms. Finally, the press for standardization comes from parents and the general public who seem to want some assurance that all fifth-grade students, regardless of the class assigned, will read the same books. (TB)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

Literature UPDATE

Fall 1995

Who controls the literature curriculum?

Richard Allington

ED 388 968

A central mission of the National Research Center on Literature Teaching and Learning CLTL) has been to stimulate reform in the teaching of literature. But the hard question is: How best can we stimulate what kind of reform? This article will explore some issues related to initiating reforms in literature curriculum and instruction.

...the power to regulate curriculum is typically assigned to those who work outside the classroom and often outside the schools.

Within the literacy education community, the focus on decentralizing curriculum decisions,i.e., returning to teachers the authority to make many decisions, including those about the texts that might be used in the classroom,has garnered much attention. But the issue is not quite so straightforward, given the power structure currently found in most K-12 educational settings and the general consensus that curriculum standardization is important.

Power and the press for standardization

Put succinctly, one important issue is that the power to regulate curriculum is typically assigned to those who work outside the classroom and often outside the schools. For instance, the authority of state legislatures to establish curriculum standards has been upheld by the federal courts, as have the implied powers of local school boards in these areas. In fact, local boards have considerable discretion in curriculum decisions. This includes, generally, the power to make textbook decisions. Reformers can rail against such authority, but until legislation is passed altering the current situation, reform of the literature curriculum will only be accomplished with the permission of others.

But altering the current regulatory environment will not be easy, if only because there seems to be widespread support for a standard curriculum. In our own work at CLTL, we have dubbed this support a "press for standardization." This press is exerted from a number of sources both within schools as well as from the outside. Regardless of the source, however, a common feature of this pressure is the constraints teachers feel on control of the curriculum.

Press from within the school

The press for standardization from within can stem from the negotiations that accompany the selection of literature to be used in a classroom. For instance, it has been common in the schools we have studied for groups of teachers to work to define a curriculum around a set of core books to be read in a particular course (World Literature) or at a particular grade level (third-grade core books; eighth-grade core books).

Continued on page 2

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

CS215080

Who controls the literature curriculum?

Continued from page 1

During one focus-group meeting, a new fourth-grade teacher told us of having several books displayed in her room that were included on the fifth-grade core books list. Another teacher noticed these books, and then proceeded to remove them from the display, noting that fourth graders were not allowed to read those books.

In another school we studied, the discussion of children's books in a Teachers as Readers group led to reconsideration of the use of a tradebook in some classrooms. The particular book in this case was Cynthia Rylant's autobiography, *But I'll Be Back Again*. The discussion initiated originally around commonalities in Rylant's book *Missing May* and her autobiography. However, the conversation drifted towards the appropriateness of the autobiography for elementary school children since she included references to emerging sexuality, specifically her first elementary school kiss. The strong feelings of inappropriateness of this topic held by some teachers were vigorously debated by others. In the end, however, those in favor of using the autobiography seemed to give in to the opponents on the issue of using it in the middle school or high school. Proponents of the book were uncomfortable with the end result but seemed even less comfortable using the book over the objections of colleagues.

In each of the four schools we studied, there existed similar sorts of press for standardizing the literature curriculum. Even when no formal core book list had been developed, teachers talked to us about "fourth-grade books," for instance, and noted that individual teachers protected certain titles they used in their classrooms and restricted the use of others deemed inappropriate by colleagues for other reasons. As in other studies, we found that "shared decision-making" does not consistently result in participating teachers realizing enhanced autonomy. Instead, participation may lead to increased pressure for compliance to collegial norms. Similarly, efforts to enhance teacher collaboration in planning instruction sometimes work to restrict autonomy as teachers feel more compelled to adopt group norms.

> *...the standard curriculum was viewed as ensuring more equitable instruction by providing all students with similar high-quality experiences.*

Press from outside the school

In another school district, a school board member wondered aloud what was so difficult about delineating which books children would be reading on which days at each grade level. In his view, a more adequate curriculum plan would provide a detailed framework identifying the common literature selections and include a common pacing schedule for completing those books.

Another recent CLTL report discusses a communication from a state education agency that noted that the nature of educational programs "requires that there be some consistency of implementation on a district-wide basis," and goes on to recommend that programs "be supervised and coordinated from the central office to ensure a consistent philosophy of instruction, congruence and articulation across the program, and uniform record keeping." This occurred in the context of state endorsement of site-based management!

We heard several rationales for standardization in the schools we studied. One argument concerned intra-district student mobility, a common situation, especially in school districts that enroll many children from low-income families. The more standardized curriculum, it was argued, allows for an easier transition for students moving from School A to School B within the district. While no one seems to have studied this issue much, it was a most common rationale for standard district curriculum.

A second argument stemmed more from concerns about monitoring teacher performance. In this case, the standard curriculum was viewed as ensuring more equitable instruction by providing all students with similar high-quality experiences. Without a common curriculum, administrators feared increased variation in the instruction offered across classrooms. Again, we know of little research on this issue.

A third argument for standardization was related to the one above, but it was argued more from a parent perspective. In this case, the standard curriculum was seen as one way of reducing parental concerns about variations across classrooms in the district. One administrator noted that standardization reduced the number of questions parents had about, "Why Johnny isn't reading *Charlotte's Web* in his third-grade classroom, while their neighbor's child is reading it in her third-grade classroom."

Albert Shanker, head of the American Federation of Teachers, recently echoed many of these arguments as he argued for national curriculum content standards in his weekly column in the *New York Times*:

> In practice, this [literature curriculum content] decision is often left to individual teachers, who are encouraged to select on the basis of their own interests or the interests of their students. We are accustomed to this relaxed, take-your-pick attitude towards curriculum and standards, but we pay heavily for it. It means we have no way of making sure that all our students have the advantage of a first-rate curriculum. . . .

Summary

Hardly anyone argues that infusing the school curriculum with literature is a bad idea. But who should control the definition and delineation of the curriculum? While many literacy educators would place children and teachers more directly in control of which literature is read in our schools, such a plan seems to garner little support among school administrators, local board members, state education agency personnel, union leaders, legislators, parents, or federal policymakers. So what sorts of reform of the school literature curriculum can be achieved given the widespread press for standardization?